

A Southport Story

Community Work in Parish Structures

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In 1982, following graduation from the University of Queensland with a degree in Social Work, Sue Crittall was employed by the Southport Parish of the Catholic Church. Since then, she has worked as the project officer for the non-government Youth Affairs sector, and is currently employed with the Uniting Church Queensland Synod as the Consultant for Social Responsibility.

TELLING THE STORY

How do you tell the story of one year in your life that seems like ten? How do you tell the story of a young woman who, newly graduated, began working as a community worker with a parish of the Catholic Church in Queensland, and of the way that position was discontinued — after only ten months and despite the remonstrations of the people with whom she worked?

I guess you tell the story as a journey of discovery. It is a journey of finding and experiencing the love of a people within a geographic area. It is a tale of discovering the intensity of

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commitment and the giving of one's heart that goes with that. It is a journey of the pain of being rejected, torn from an area and the people you are living and breathing.

The Southport parish of the Catholic Church in Queensland advertised the position of Parish Community Worker in late 1982. I was then finishing my social work degree on final placement in Wollongong. Being away from Queensland meant I had to ring up long distance after seeing the advertisement and make my enquiries as a prospective worker by telephone.

"Job description?" came the rigid voice on the other end of the telephone. "No, I am not aware that there is a job description available."

There wasn't, yet I was assured a worker could develop this as she went along — a point I heartily agree with. But the extra dimension, often untold, is the assumption an employer makes about how this job description will be developed — by consultation with or in isolation from the powers that be. Maybe we don't realize that we have a choice. My Southport experience tells me that the only workable way to develop a job description is by consultation.

The parish didn't know what they wanted from me. In fact, very few parishoners even realized I had been appointed until after I had arrived in the area. All new work situations are different. This way of entry carried with it a number of problems. It is difficult for people to own a worker if they have no idea she exists.

The background to the appointment was this. A number of people in the parish were concerned about the needs of others in their parish community. They called a public parish meeting to share their concerns and look at what needed to be done to change things. Out of this large meeting, a small group of people including the parish priest were nominated to form a committee to follow these questions through. They had been thinking about obtaining a house for a community centre, and had called in an 'expert' from outside the parish, a person with experience in community work. He asked them, "Do you want a building or people?" This was one of the questions the new committee set themselves to answer.

In the event, the parish committee opted for flesh and blood rather than bricks and mortar. They decided to employ a community worker for a one year contract, with the

understanding that the position would be reviewed towards the end of the year and, if found "successful", would be renewed. This committee then became the community worker's advisory committee.

I put inverted commas around successful to indicate that we must think very carefully about its meaning. What does "successful" mean? Does it mean that the worker in this position will demonstrate success by the number of groups that she forms and by the number of services she helps to provide? Or does it mean her effectiveness will be evaluated by the number of people who say how marvellous she is, and what wonderful things she has done for them? I would hope not — if the task (and the job description) is to build community, then this is not an area where we can use any such crude measure of "success".

My personal understanding of what makes a worker "successful" is clear. Of my work a friend once said, "You're doing okay". That gut feeling that you're on the right track is very real at the personal level. But the public indicators of success are not always so clear. Community building is more a process than it is tasks. There are many types of services that are a very necessary part of community life. But there is something that goes deeper than providing services. Community building must include asking questions about *who* does things, *why*, *how*, *when* and *where*. It involves a growing sense of belonging, as people begin to take responsibility for the decisions that affect their lives. These developments are not always easy to demonstrate or to quantify but they are a very large part of what I understand "success" to mean.

VALUES AND PERSPECTIVES

Building community is a phrase that has caught public attention as the "new thing" to be after. It sounds, and is often criticised for being, airy-fairy. By my definition, building community means working towards a situation or a society where people relate to others as people, not roles, where power is shared, where all people matter. To build this type of community is hard work.

For a start, we have to articulate the sort of community or society we want to build. We have to be able to look critically at the world and sometimes say, "No, that is wrong. That is not how we want the world to be". Then we have to identify the

values and the principles of the new and better society we envisage. We have to mark out a path towards a community based society. And finally — yet this is really only the beginning — we have to look at the ways we can begin to realize such a society now.

The paths to a community society can be very different. People can take work paths, I believe, into whatever setting they feel appropriate. Moving from a neighbourhood setting into a state-wide organization, I was told by co-workers that I had sold out and gone up the system. There seems to be too much purity amongst some workers whose grasp of ideology prevents them from grubbying their hands. There is too much work that needs to be done — and, dare I say it, too few people who see the need for such work — to waste time on petty squabbles and turgid ideological battles. If the aim is to build a society based on community, then we need many different ways of working. Developing a community is as much a style of working based on process (rather than tasks) as it is a philosophy based on a set of principles and a value system that arises from a particular analysis of society.

In practice, as a paid community worker in a church parish setting, community building means, first and foremost, that the worker must develop an analysis of society: that is, an understanding of why the world is like it is, why this particular part of the world looks the way it does, and what contribution the church can make in a local setting.

Arriving to work in Southport, I found I had no written job description, although there was a great deal of discussion about what the worker would be employed to do. Two of the common sentiments that I heard from parish committee members in the early days were: "Build more of a community in the parish", and "We don't even know who each other are". From the beginning, neither the committee nor myself clearly understood what it would mean to begin building community in Southport parish.

CONTEXT AND CO-WORKERS

I was employed by the Southport parish of the Catholic Church in Queensland. As I saw it, I was employed in this area some eighty kilometres south of Brisbane, for these people, to work towards the development of community. Five suburbs make up the Southport parish, and they are located in a wider

geographic area known as the Gold Coast. This area of land, edged on one side by water, is a famous (or, some might say, infamous) tourist area — with the associated transient populations of tourist resorts, with high rise dwellings, constant destruction and construction of buildings, a high level of drug abuse and prostitution, and a loneliness all its own.

I drove around Southport parish attempting to understand its size and complexity, to identify key places and buildings, to see the differences in houses and streets and suburbs. This reconnaissance exercise overwhelmed yet also excited me. This was the area where I was going to work.

The parish of Southport is administered by Vincentian Priests (not Diocesan priests) belonging to the order of St. Vincent de Paul, an order with a long tradition of service to the poor. I remember so clearly a friend saying to me that if I was going to be sacked from this job to make sure I left on a poverty issue!

Poverty? No one told me when I accepted the position that my salary would come from Art Union money. Nor did they tell me that my office would be located upstairs of the Bingo Hall. A strange extension of parish work, I thought, as I read the Vincentian Order promotion pamphlet in the back of the Church saying the priests were committed to working preferentially with the poor. The Bingo Hall was, in reality, called the community centre — a plush, two-storey brick building with the latest in carpets and light fittings. It housed the Art Union offices upstairs as well as accommodating a full-time parish administrator and parish secretary. There were five Vincentian Priests based here: one the parish priest, the other four working in different pastoral aspects of parish life.

In hindsight, there were a number of issues connected with my employment of which I should have been conscious — I gradually, and painfully, developed an awareness of them. There was, for example, the employment of a non-Catholic to work intimately with a Catholic parish. There was the employment of a young woman to work alongside five Catholic priests. I didn't see these as issues. Oh yes, that was naive. But I was employed to work. The priests also worked there. I presumed that we would be co-workers — sharing thoughts, concerns, dreams and visions about the parish and its future.

For various reasons, this was not so. Even without my presence, there was a lot of tension and conflict amongst the priests. I guess I exacerbated that, both by my position and my

gender. A couple of previous priests had left the parish "with a woman". Insinuations about my character, sexual and otherwise, were circulating in the parish. I don't know who started them. One woman tried to catch me out with questions about my personal life and veiled hints that X "would never leave the priesthood". Amazing to think that friendships become suspect when a person is a priest. I wanted to relate to the priests as people, not as roles. I wandered upstairs, into an area of the Presbytery, which I believed to be part of the shared office space. I didn't know I entered sacred ground. The working quarters were downstairs, the living area upstairs. There were plenty of similar incidents arising out of similar boundary setting, and some in reverse, such as the re-opening of doors I had closed for privacy.

We never discussed the relationship between myself as community worker and the priests as my co-workers. I didn't think to discuss it until much too far down the track. It was hard enough with some of the priests just to keep communication channels open about practical day to day matters. I was forever striding down corridors, seeking a priest or priests to work with, referring people to them, rummaging through parish card files to locate a different person to meet or find the address of a person one of the priests had mentioned in conversation, working with the groups within the parish, participating in countless parish events, working to develop and be a part of the community of the parish. The difficulties of communication were enormous. Even so, it came as a shock to hear the parish priest say to me, after a year of giving what felt like "my all" to the area and its people: "Well, what have you done anyway?" As a member of the Uniting Church, I did not realize that to 'cross the line' into the bowels of the Catholic Church would be an issue. I certainly, and quickly, realized my lack of knowledge about the Catholic system and worked hard to rectify this. My brain is still sorting through all that input! When I started work in Southport I didn't know much about Catholic teachings, traditions and practices. Asking and finding out was one way of getting to know the Catholic faith and traditions as well as a way of meeting many people on their own ground.

BEGINNING

Like many a budding community worker I began a log book when I started work in Southport. Unfortunately, like most of us, I did not keep the log going. I regret that. A log is a place to record incidents and actions, to develop process skills and analysis of one's work. If I had kept it going . . . but at least I have a record of my first days on the job.

Day 1 — early January

Arrived office — no one to greet me. This is going to be lonely working here. I am going to have to establish support relationships to keep me going and get out of this office as soon as possible. Feel bombarded by a desire to 'do'. Also feel a little apathy creeping in because I am so scared. Feel thrust in at the deep end. Needing help.

Three years on, as I transfer those words from my log to this paper, I realize how accurate they were. A worker has to get out of the office, to relate to people, to discover names, dates, places and streets. A worker needs a support group — and a few individuals she can turn to. I describe it as "safe houses".

On that same first day one of the priests shut the Presbytery screen door in my face, saying, "No, the parish priest isn't in", adding, "I'm against having you here". Nothing like putting your cards on the table!

Day 2

Feel better today — am starting to paddle around. Feel I am having to perform — people here are so unclear as to what I am to be doing. I know the signs of panic are very near.

Sounds a bit melodramatic yet that was how it was and how I felt. As always I sought refuge in thinking and reading. I knew I had to organize myself, so I sat down that week and began to look at what I needed to do to begin working in the parish. Conscious of the theory and teachings of community work, I made a decision to meet new people every week (something I believe to be vital, though difficult), and I decided to ask people what they wanted me to do — not in an abstract way, but in terms of the way they saw the Church currently operating in their community, and of how they wanted to see it operating. This, as it turned out, was a good move. It calmed me down and got me asking appropriate questions and meeting people.

At the end of second week in Southport I got paid. I discovered my salary was on a wage scale some \$3,000 less

than what had been previously negotiated: "We thought that would be okay", explained the parish administrator. In a blind-with-tears telephone conversation to Brisbane, I exploded — with disappointment, frustration and anger. Family members said, "Don't let them get away with it". The last thing a new worker needs is that sort of mistrust, yet I have since heard of a number of similar experiences. One of the many lessons from Southport: ask for a written contract of employment and a termination settlement of employment. Get things in writing.

Fortunately, at about this time I located a woman who had originally been involved in pressing for a community worker in the parish. A trained social worker with a community development heart, she was to be my supervisor during my time in Southport — more than that, she was my friend and ally, and later fought the fight to retain the position of community worker.

A supervisor and individual supporters are a great help, but there is also a real need to have a group of people and, I think, one person in particular as a contact person within the group (say the convenor) who can be aware of one's work. It is to these people a worker reports, and their important role is to affirm the direction the worker takes. I can't emphasize this enough. My Southport experience taught me that it is crucial to have a formal recognized body within the employing organisation or agency, often a committee, which can keep the hierarchy informed and communicate with the worker about expectations, and whether or not they are being met. When the crunch came for me at Southport, there was no regularly meeting committee that could legitimately say, "Hey, it's our role, alongside and with the parish priest, to decide on the future of this project".

My management committee in Southport consisted of two school teachers, the school principal, the parish administrator and the parish priest. The three people connected with the school were committed to my work and to me. They supported me both publicly and privately. However, whenever this committee met there was always conflict, tension and argument. Conversations went round and round in circles. It was so bad that we gradually just didn't meet.

I continued to see the three teachers regularly, and I also kept popping in to say hello to the parish administrator. He would say to me, "How are things?" I would say "okay" and attempt

to tell him some of what I was doing. I really failed in that. I just gave up talking about my work with someone who gave me a nice benign smile and nod of the head. I chose not to put my energy into trying to make a man dominated by finance and figures understand my orientation to people.

MIDDLE

The parish priest was away for a fair period of time during my year — three months was the longest continual break. While he was away, my supervisor and I convened an open parish meeting to tell people what I was doing as their parish community worker, and to seek confirmation from them about the content, style, direction and processes of my work. We planned this to occur mid-way in my year's contract of work. It was unfortunate the parish priest was away.

People at that meeting were highly supportive of my work and myself. It marked the beginning of a period of involvement with the other four priests in the parish with me as a worker. Because the parish priest was absent, we taped the meeting. I don't think he ever listened to it.

An added dimension of this new period of involvement with the priests and parish was the arrival of four more priests (so there were now nine priests working in Southport), who made up a renewal team. The renewal was designed to strengthen and develop the parish and its members. It required that the priests and the presbytery be available to parishioners, an unfamiliar concept for the priests in this parish, but one that I had been working towards.

The renewal team included me as a team member, and I participated in meetings to plan the renewal. The parish priest objected to my being included as a co-worker. It is important to say that this renewal was for three months and absolutely dominated the parish life and structure for that time. People were interested to be involved. Partly by circumstance and partly on my prompting, they had been giving a good deal of thought to issues of participation and decision-making in their parish. They didn't need to be convinced that they had a role to play in the parish. So when, as part of the renewal, the parish looked at their first priority, they decided they wanted to build community within and without of the parish. This No.1 priority came well after the decision to discontinue the position of

community worker. The parish priest, refusing to change his decision, just went greener about the gills.

Meanwhile, I had work to do. Community work in a parish setting involves a great deal: door-knocking, holding area meetings, holding issue nights, working with welfare agencies, working ecumenically, working with the Diocese of the Church in Brisbane, sharing and realizing dreams, gathering people interested in craft mornings and in youth groups, running a camp, participating in parish events and parish visitation, dropping in to say hello.

A parish has a number of suburbs, and each suburb has characteristics of its own. A worker needs a brain that can recall not only individual details about people but also streets and identifiable landmarks, and can as well hold an understanding of the totality of the area and the agency she works in. A parish also has various lists of people on parish rolls and people who are members of existing groups.

There is no better way to meet people than on your feet. To undertake geographic networking it is important to "see it all at a glance", so a map is important. The Southport parish was divided into five sections, and parish members lived within each of these sections. But you can't tell people, in the interest of tidy statistics, to relate to one geographic area and not to another. If people relate to one particular area, because of history, relationships or personal needs and interests, then you have to respect that. Even though it makes everything much more complicated, at least you know you are dealing with real, not imagined, relationships. People develop relationships and networks formally (an area bible study group) or informally (dropping in next door, waving hello, holding a street get-together). Greater community involvement or action evolves when local people become aroused over a particular issue that is important to them and to their community.

Working in a parish setting offers possibilities to work with individuals or groups on a number of issues as well as to develop relationships. While in Southport I worked with people on the issue of housing.

The Catholic Deanery of the Gold Coast (that is, the collection of parishes in that one region) had put forward a proposal to the Brisbane Diocese that a detox. unit for alcoholic men be established in the area. I was in my second week of work when I was called to Brisbane to discuss this proposal. I honestly

admitted that I had not even had time to delve into the basic issue yet, and therefore had no idea whether a detox. unit was needed. I undertook to return to the Coast and to look at the housing issues — what kind of housing existed, who lived in it, what low cost housing was available, how many caravans there were, who slept on the streets and where, what agencies were involved with housing on the Coast?

I worked on a number of issues under the housing banner, by myself, with others, and in groups. As part of this exercise, I talked to Southport parish members about housing, about whether it was a right or a luxury. One part of my work in this area saw the development of a housing bond fund. We collected money by telling the hidden housing story on the Coast to groups of parishioners at Mass, and to members individually. Since my salary came from the Art Union which raffled luxury homes, cars and boats, it raised several eyebrows to ask people in the parish to question access to basic housing — not least the parish administrator who oversaw the Art Unions.

In this, as in many other areas, the worker often has to challenge the way things are in society — to look at power, responsibility and justice. To do this in a Church setting is, I believe, very powerful. The Bible and Jesus Christ give clear messages: share resources, have an option for the poor, give away one shirt if you have two. Community development work is about empowering people to begin to make their own decisions about who they are, where they are, what they want to do in their space. The housing issue is but one of many that this parish needs to address. Other clear issues are unemployment, income security, health, use of leisure, isolation and alienation. Issues of social concern abound on the Coast — a wealth of avenues of work for a church committed to the poor.

ENDING

The parish priest decided in October of my year that the position of community worker was not to be continued. He never made clear his reasons for this decision. Many an aspersion was cast on my character as if to prompt ill-thinking about me personally, a much used way of attempting to discredit a worker.

The parish priest himself told me that my position was no longer to be continued. I have to admit that I was not expecting

this death knell to my work. I was confident of my ability and of the effectiveness of the work I had done. I was certain that the work needed to continue. I expressed my concern for the parish and for the people if this work was to be discontinued.

It is a hazy and painful time to recollect. I recall walking "calmly" out of the parish priest's office after he gave me the news, feeling totally lost. The tears welled up. I was fortunate in that one of the others priests saw me and, with obvious concern, asked what was wrong. It was then I began to howl.

I wept to lose Southport. I grieved that I would no longer be working with and for these people. My utter devastation at that point probably provided me with the courage to continue to see out my time in the parish. But I quickly realized my changed circumstances and tried to move beyond my own grief and loss to the needs of the parish and use the small amount of time I had to finish my work there. I did not deny that I was to leave the community worker position in Southport. I faced that immediately — my own human frailty made me face it. But tears came at times, the trickling variety, as I watched the struggle that ensued between priest and lay people. I experienced the powerlessness of being a victim of rigid decision-making — seeing the injustice, being unable to change it and yet being bitterly affected by it.

'The struggle between priest and lay people' — how clear cut and clinical that sounds. It makes no reference to the tearing apart of people's dreams for their parish. It reveals none of the anguish of parents who had seen some possibility for their young people within the Church. It tells nothing of the furtive discussions held on many a night, of the outbursts of anger, of the cries of disbelief, of the plans to protest.

The night I was told that the position would be discontinued at the end of the year, I contacted three people in the parish to let them know what had happened and to ask what we could do. I chose my supervisor, then a man who was an established and respected member of the parish with whom I had had a lot of discussions, and thirdly one of the school teachers with whom I had often talked through ideas and frustrations and who was a member of the non-meeting committee. She was a friend who comforted me, and was angry with me, in a time of personal defeat.

Each of these people immediately passed on the news of the parish priest's decision to other members of the parish. Many

were angry: "But this is wrong. It should be our decision. It is our parish — priests and us here together". I had support from many quarters, even from most of the priests.

Gradually I came to realize that there were two issues under examination:

- (1) was the position needed in the parish?
- (2) was this worker a suitable worker for this position?

Keeping the two apart became vital in avoiding getting caught up in the mud-slinging that accompanies a situation of conflict. It would be fair to say that the parish people I had worked with in Southport were incensed. From the moment I shared the priest's decision with those three members of the parish, the conflict was on.

There were letters, deputations, meetings, meals, phone calls — a deluge of activity and anger directed against the priest's decision. Again, it was important to understand that it was the issue the people were angry about, not the person who made the decision. The parish priest had difficulty in being able to keep these issues apart. He was incensed that lay people in this parish would oppose a decision he had made.

I can only guess that his subsequent dismissal of me, less than four weeks later and six weeks prior to the end of my contract—when I was told to depart within five hours, give in my keys, not return, and handed pay cheques, a box of chocolates and a "thank you for working here" smile—was a response to the protests of the lay people and the other clergy.

It was my supervisor who bore the burden of organizing the struggle and the brunt of the priest's anger. She threw herself into this task at great personal cost. She worked tirelessly to support me and to rally others, and she crossed swords with the parish priest many times. Since my departure, she has continued to work with the issue of lay participation in the parish, to advocate conflict resolution processes, to ask where the parish is headed, and to urge support for both lay people and clergy. To her, in the words of C.J. Dennis, "I dips me lid".

TO BEGIN AGAIN

Since those early painful days, there is much more lay involvement in parish decision-making in Southport. They have even created a parish council. I was not re-employed in Southport, nor has the position been continued. The conflict

didn't tear the people apart. It brought them together. It helped them focus a concern that their needs and wants for their parish were not being heard. This is in no way to say that the crisis of my dismissal did not cause heartache and distress.

My ten months in Southport parish were not only a time of conflict and battle. Certainly a few struggles did occur between a young lay Uniting Church female and several middle-aged Catholic priests. I questioned the role of the priests, both as a non-Catholic and as a co-worker in a geographic area. I even got angry with the parish priest. (On one occasion I suggested that the priests might organize and serve tea one morning to a group of parishioners. He replied in an amazed tone, "But that's not our job". "Oh, yes, that's right", I said, "you're only supposed to wash feet".) Yet I came away from Southport with an even firmer belief than before that it is possible to develop and strengthen community from a church setting. Working with Southport people was slow, exciting, sometimes scary and daunting, certainly painful at times, but always a joy.

Leaving and ending — the two words are uppermost in the mind of a community worker who is winding down her time in a position and in a particular area. I have re-phrased those words for myself to mean "getting out as well as you can, as quickly as you can". There really is no best way of doing it. Nor is there an end to the effort and the hope — rather a realization that the journey has only begun.